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The reality of stem cell research

Just two weeks ago, the House of Representatives considered whether the federal government should fund embryonic stem cell research. Based upon the correspondence and calls I have received on this subject, it seems many people think this was a vote to legalize or prohibit embryonic stem cell research. It wasn't.

Stem cell research does not violate federal law unless it is conducted using federal dollars on unapproved embryonic stem cell lines. The issue we had before us was whether to use federal funds for more embryonic stem cell research. I voted no.

Few dispute that embryonic stem cell research may lead to more effective treatments for many diseases, perhaps even cures. There is less agreement about whether non-embryonic stem cell research, which receives significant federal funding, holds the same or greater promise.

Those who oppose embryonic stem cell research simply believe it immoral for humans to destroy human embryos no matter the human good that may result. And they are deeply offended that their tax dollars could be used to do this.

Withholding federal funding avoids this deep offense felt by many opponents, some of whom observe, with disappointment, that embryonic stem cell research will proceed apace without federal funding. Their argument influenced my vote. I was also influenced by the very promising scientific studies suggesting that new human embryonic stem cell lines might soon be obtained without destroying embryos. Scientists appear to be on the verge of developing a method of harmlessly producing stem cells from human embryos.

I am one of the co-sponsors of H.R. 2574, The Respect for Life Embryonic Stem Cell Act of 2005, which provides federal funding to support research (using non-human embryos) to perfect techniques for extracting stem cells from human embryos without harming the embryos in any manner.

You might ask who could possibly object to such a hopeful solution. This whole subject has become so charged with passion devoid of reason that, on the one side, some of my congressional colleagues will shy away from the bill simply because the title includes the words "Embryonic Stem Cell." And on the other side, some may withhold support simply because the title includes the words "Respect for Life." Members of Congress on either side of this issue will wonder if their supporters could be upset or confused by their sponsorship of a bill with those words in the title.

What a shame.

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